



# Handling Problem Situations

The more you encourage group members to explain their positions, the better chance you have of reducing their hostility. This may mean leaving the course content for a while, but more productive learning in the long run will make up for the time spent dealing with the situation. An efficient approach is to use the conflict as a learning tool by incorporating it into the discussions and exercises planned for the course.

If you sense resistance when introducing a new skill or some new information midway through a program, you should again take the time to focus on the resistance and identify it before the situation gets out of control. Don't be afraid to stop the program, ask what's happening, and propose a discussion of the problem.

Negative behaviours of specific individuals create another difficult situation. Below is a list of some common behaviours you might face within the training environment.

**Monopolizing:** taking a great deal of time

**One-upping:** trying to appear more skilled and knowledgeable than the others in the group, including the trainer

**Complaining:** continually finding fault with the procedures of the trainer

**Intellectualizing:** excessive rationalizing and justifying of one's ideas and beliefs

**Withdrawing:** not participating (and sometimes distracting the group by doing so)

**Arguing:** taking vocal exception to any comments with which one disagrees

**Questioning:** stopping the flow of presentations by frequently asking questions

**Clowning:** joking at inappropriate times

The key to handling such behaviours is to not take them personally. Napier and Gershenfeld (1983) suggest several reasons why problem behaviours that have nothing to do with you occur. The participant may have been ordered to attend the training to shape up. Or he may be hiding fears about failing to do well in the program. Or she may be a long-time employee who doesn't believe anything will change. Or he may feel that he is too old to learn new approaches. Or, after years of hostility toward her boss, she may be displacing her anger on you. Or he may like the attention he attracts with his behaviour.

Coping effectively with participant problems is an extremely important training skill. When a participant exhibits problem behaviours, the whole group likely will become involved and therefore be distracted from the actual training program. Negative behaviours also tend to rattle the trainer and distract from the delivery of the course content.

Your responsibility is to the entire class, not just to one participant. You should not allow the disrupter to monopolize your attention to the point where the program begins to suffer. If you do need to say something to a participant exhibiting a problem behaviour, it is far better to do so privately. Introduce the request with a statement such as "I think that it would be helpful if ..." or "I'd like to ask you to ...".

One way to control potential troublemakers is periodically to remind the whole group to adhere to the norms or ground rules established at the beginning of the program. In addition, make some new requests from time to time to prevent problems from occurring. Common requests used by experienced trainers include:

"Please hold your questions for a few moments."  
"I think that it would be helpful for us to agree that people should speak only for themselves."

"Let's just have one comment per person for now so that everyone has a chance to speak."

"Try to build on each other's ideas."

"When you go into your groups, I'd like to ask you to listen to the opinions of each member before getting into further discussions."

"Let's have a rule that a different spokesperson be nominated every time that a subgroup is asked to report its findings."

"Please, no cheap shots."

As conflicts between you and one or more participants arise in a class, you may begin to feel annoyed with the participant(s). Be wary of becoming unsettled by a conflict: managing your feelings and remaining in control is important to your overall leadership of the class. Do everything you can to defuse and depersonalize the situation. Try to acknowledge the challenge openly and to respond in a warm but businesslike tone of voice. This will tell the rest of the group that you are confident and in charge. Some tips on maintaining control in the face of participant conflict are:

***Don't get caught in one-to-one power struggles.*** Acknowledge the value of a participant's views even when they are contrary to your own (e.g., "You've got a good point"). Empathize with his feelings. Show interest by asking the participant to go into more detail about his concerns. Summarize the participant's position. Agree to disagree. Offer to discuss the matter further at the coffee break.

***Use good-natured humor.*** One way to deflect conflict is to humor the combatant. Be careful not to be sarcastic or patronizing. Gently protest the harassment (e.g., "Enough, enough for one day!"). Humorously, put yourself down instead of the participant (e.g., "I guess I'm being stubborn, but...").

***Connect on a personal level.*** Whether the problem participant is hostile or withdrawn, make a point of getting to know him during breaks or lunch. It's unlikely that a person will continue to give you a hard time or remain distant if you've taken an interest in her.

***Broaden the participation of others.*** The more you use small groups and other devices to involve everyone, the harder it will be for just a few individuals to dominate the group. Also, ask

for the opinions and comments of others (e.g., "I'd like to hear from those of you who haven't spoken so far").

Protect participants as needed. If a participant or a subgroup is being attacked by a barrage of criticism, find something positive or provide a plausible explanation for what occurred. (e.g., "I agree that John was heavy-handed in that role play but I really like his honesty.")

Here is a list of several problem situations that can occur in training programs. How would you handle them?

1. A participant monopolizes discussions.
2. A participant goes off on a lengthy tangent unrelated to the current discussion.
3. A participant continually holds private conversations with another participant.
4. A participant disrupts the session with jokes.
5. A participant strongly expresses disagreement with what the trainer says.
6. A participant has a distracting habit (e.g., pencil tapping, pen clicking, paper shuffling, etc.).
7. A participant does other work during the training session.
8. A participant does not adhere to time schedules, arriving late or coming and going at will during class.
9. A participant does not participate at all during discussion.
10. A participant does not do the in-class assignments or the homework.

Here are potential solutions to these situations:

1. **Monopolizing**  
Summarize the participant's viewpoint (active listening), then move on.  
Ask others for their input.  
Ask the participant to hold off until a break.
2. **Tangents**  
Ask the participant to hold off till later in the seminar.  
Summarize the participant's viewpoint and move on.

Address directly the fact that a tangent has been raised—"That seems to be a different issue,"—and restate the purpose of the discussion, asking others for input.

### 3. Private conversations

Use nonverbal methods to regain the participants' attention (make eye contact, move closer).

Ask one of them a question (making sure to say the participant's name first).

### 4. Jokes

Privately ask the participant to minimize jokes.

Resume the session after the humorous interjections (be as serious as possible).

### 5. Disagreeing

Summarize the participant's viewpoint; ask others for their opinions.

Agree to disagree.

Agree in part, then state how you differ and why.

### 6. Distractions

Use nonverbal means to get the participant's attention (e.g., eye contact).

Ignore if the behaviour is not detracting from the session.

Privately ask the participant to stop.

### 7. Doing own work

Use nonverbal methods to get the participant's attention.

If a group activity is under way, ask all to participate.

Ignore the behaviour if it is not affecting others.

Privately ask the person to participate actively in the program.

### 8. Time schedules

Ignore the behaviour.

Adhere to time schedules; don't let everyone suffer for one person's lateness.

Remind participants of time frames.

Privately request promptness (as a courtesy to the rest of the group, not just to you).

### 9. Non-participation

Use nonverbal means to draw the person into the discussion.

Ask direct but non-threatening questions.

Connect with the participant during breaks.  
Ask the participant to be the leader in a small group activity.

Leave such participants alone (just because they're not participating doesn't mean they aren't learning).

### 10. No assignments

Reemphasize the purpose of assignments (either to the class as a whole or one on one).

Ignore the behaviour.

Recapitulate major learning from assignments so that delinquent participants don't lose out.

### *One final thought as you consider handling a problem situation:*

Remember that it may not be necessary for you to intervene every time that a participant exhibits a problem behaviour during your training program. Very often, other participants will make it know that they find such behaviour inappropriate and unnecessary. A good guideline is to intervene only if the problem behaviour is repetitive or affects the entire training program. Also, realize that participants who have been difficult often want to find a way out themselves. Give them some space to discover a graceful, face-saving way to change their behaviour.

To gain leadership of your training group effectively, it is important to keep in mind that prevention and intervention are the keys to establishing and maintaining control. Setting positive group norms and modeling those behaviours throughout the session help participants know what guidelines to follow.

Controlling the timing and pacing of your program prevents boredom and keeps participants focused on the course content. The way that you handle problem situations will give further credibility to your leadership, allowing you to concentrate on giving presentations and leading discussions.

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